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ABSTRACT

Reflecting interest in children's language development, including an increased emphasis on written language production, this paper contains a review of research, some assumptions about children's language development, and a list of objectives for a combined literature and writing program for above-average students at the intermediate level. The research reviewed in the paper led to the following assumptions: that a sequential development in syntactic maturity is reflected in language usage; that by the age of eight a greater variety in the use of verbs and sentences is possible; that children's uses of sentence types and sentence structure patterns reflect the type of texts they read; and that children's literature serves as a model for developing more creative and grammatically interesting writing. The paper then lists eight activities for stimulating written language development, some of which include utilizing award-winning books, sentence combining lessons, creative writing, an introduction to a variety of literary forms, a review of the elements of expository writing, and a variety of publishing techniques to display and share the children's work. References containing teaching suggestions and a list of children's books are appended. (EL)

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Enhancing Written Language Development:

Is It Possible

presented by

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at

National Reading and Language Arts Educators' Conference
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'The recent decade has brought a renewed interest in children's language development including an increased emphasis on written language production. What are the developmental stages involved in written linguistic growth? Is it possible to enhance this development through curricular means? Do reading and writing relate in some way in this process? If language and syntactic development can be increased, can children's literature provide the needed model?

Recent studies (Loban, 1963) have shown clearly that linguistic development does occur well into adolescence. C. Chomsky (1972) concluded that there is a clear developmental sequence of linguistic stages through which all children apparently pass. Interestingly enough, however, different children reach these stages at varying ages. Palermo (1972) found increased variety in the structural patterns used by children through the grades. There was greater variation in structure within sentences in terms of vocabulary, position of phrases, and nominalization. Mellon (1969) concluded that as cognitive growth occurred, sentence structure increased in complexity. Independent clauses grow longer, sentences become more highly elaborated, subordination is used, a wider range of sentence patterns is employed, and sentences are more heavily and deeply embedded. Hunt (1965), who developed

the T-unit to measure sentence complexity, named this phenomenon of increasing syntactic complexity, "syntactic maturity". Hunt found the T-units of mature students contained more combined and consolidated sentences.

In further research Palermo (1972) found that period between kindergarten and first grade, and fifth and seventh grades showed large increases in new grammatical constructions. During this latter stage, sentence-embedding transformations increased significantly. In combination with this growth comes marked instability in linguistic development as new levels are mastered. Slobin (1968) pointed out that, during this developmental period, particular linguistic forms are not comprehended nor produced until the underlying cognitive aspects are developed. Once the growth occurs the child will look to language for the means to express those new cognitive structures.

Wilkinson (1983), while researching in England, found a developmental process in children's writing. Seven-year-olds seem to produce syntactically simple sentences with scarce adjectives and adverbs. Certain words serve many purposes with a few words doing a large number of jobs. The verbs used tend to be common ones. On the whole, written language resembles speech. By age eight, there seems to be a greater variety of verbs. Sentence variety is increasing, though not yet complicated. By age eleven, syntactic

development is still simple though moving toward written appropriateness. The lexis at this stage becomes more literary. By age thirteen, Wilkinson found control of syntax evident with variation of structure common. The lexis has also become more emotionally charged with words, phrases, similes, and metaphors.

Most researchers, including Loban (1963), Slobin (1968), and Palermo (1972), would agree that cognitive growth produces increased written syntactic development even without the benefit of pedagogy. Mellon (1969) raises the appropriate question: Is normal growth optimal growth? In other words, can syntactic fluency be enhanced by special treatment? Stotsky further questions that if children master more complex sentences after participating in a special language arts program, what is the cause? Is this development the result of what was already within their syntactic competence, having needed only more structured practice, or in addition, has their linguistic competence been enriched and extended? Many of these research questions at this time remained unsolved.

Even though answers to the above questions remain inconclusive, there is rather extensive research relating syntactic maturity to reading comprehension scores. Evanechko (1974) found two language measures significant predictors of reading achievement. The communication unit

or the index of the number of ideas expressed and the flexibility or complexity and sophistication of expression in language consistently related to reading comprehension. Stotsky (1971) then raises the question: Does the "syntactic level at which a student writes influence or is it influenced by the syntactic level at which he reads?" In a recent study, Zeman (1969) then hypothesizes: Is children's use of sentence types and sentence structural patterns in written composition a function of the frequency of sentence types and sentence structural patterns found in their reading materials? Echkoff (1983) found in a study of second graders that children do use linguistic structures they have read in their basal texts. With children using a basal with more complexity of literary prose, there were extra words per T-unit, more complex verb forms, and more elaborate sentences in terms of subordinate clauses, infinitive phrases, and participial phrases. These students also tended to write more complex stories. Zeman (1969) found better readers in second and third grade used more compound and complex sentences in their writing. In addition, as their reading comprehension increased, the proportion of simple sentences decreased.

After studying children's acquisition of certain syntactic structures, C. Chomsky (1972) chose to study the rate of this acquisition. Her underlying assumption was:

> The child who reads (or listens to) a variety of rich and complex materials benefits from a range of linguistic inputs that is unavailable to the non-literary child. It is this exposure that we wish to examine for its relation to rate of linguistic development. (Chomsky, 1972, p.23)

Chomsky's study does seem to indicate that exposure to more complex language available from reading goes hand-in-hand with increased knowledge of language. Frank Smith (1981) feels there is not enough time to teach writing through the study of grammar and the practice of writing alone. "The only source of knowledge sufficiently rich and reliable for learning about written language is the writing already done by others. In other words, one learns to write by reading." (Smith, 1981, p.795)

If one can assume that written language compentency can be increased, what would be the best program for so doing? Pickert (1978) and Stotsky (1971) have observed that, even before Chomsky's work, teachers recognized that literature contributed to children's language development even if the specific ways were not known. Noyce (1981) observed, "We believe that children's literature can play an important role in improving syntactic competence by providing an effective vehicle for the integration of language arts experience." (Noyce, 1981, p.301).

Pickert (1978) further observes that literature can provide specific lessons in sentence patterns, sequential formats, and vocabulary enrichment. Odegaard (1972) found that once children were exposed to more complex sentence structure, they used a greater number of different sentence patterns and transformations. When the stories of the children in the Odegaard study were judged by independent judges, not only were there more complex contructions, but there was a significant difference in the creativity within the stories. The creative stories used a greater number of sentence patterns and larger number of transformations. McClure (1982) points out that a study of informational materials can assist the young reader in building a frame of reference about how informational books are written in contrast to narrative materials. Devries' (1970) research indicated that just writing alone does not improve fifth graders' writing in terms of content, mechanics, organization, wording and phrasing, grammar, and sentence structure. Not surprisingly, Devries logically concludes that writing tasks must be literature-centered or involve reading assignments. Mills (1974) used literary samples in her research for illustrative purposes. Instruction based on literature was given in sentence structure, morphology, figurative language, realism, fantasy, sequential order, paragraph development, character descriptions, and vocabulary enrichment. First, literature was presented for

pure enjoyment, and later, it was used as a model to improve writing. The study resulted in higher writing sample scores, plus higher scores on ITBS Capitalization, Punctuation, and Total Language tests. In Stotsky's (1981) review of literature several studies found additional reading improved grammatical structure. Even students who were not given additional writing practice improved their writing. "It seems that writing programs are not nearly as effective if they exist in a reading vacuum" (Adams, 1983).

From the previous review of research, some assumptions can be made about children's written language development which can lead to the establishment of objectives for a combined children's literature and writing program. The writing curriculum to be described is not intended to be a "basics" writing sequence. It is assumed that above average students at the intermediate level have mastered basic writing skills. The primary purpose of this curriculum is to develop more elaborative written language production through an intensive study of a few pieces of noteworthy children's literature and informational materials.

Basic Assumptions

1. There does seem to be a sequential development in syntactic maturity which is reflected in written

language.

2. By age eight, there is some indication that greater variety of verbs and sentence variation is possible.
3. Some research indicates that children's various uses of sentence types and sentence structure patterns reflect the type of texts they are reading.
4. Elaborative children's literature can serve as a model for developing more creative and grammatically interesting pieces of written expression and thereby encourage a child's emerging discourse competency.

Basic Objectives

1. The students should be able to:
    a. Enjoy several pieces of literature that are read by the teacher.
    b. Examine in detail some of the following literary devices--descriptive words, sequential development and transition, sentence-combining using connectives, and introductory clauses.
    c. Be able to use these literary devices in oral language production.
    d. Create and publish a variety of literary works. Some will be responds to various award-winning literary works and others will be creative endeavors using the literary devices studied.

Activities

1. During the entire course the teacher will read frequently from a variety of award winning books. A brief bibliography accompanies this paper.
2. During these readings key elements such as descriptive words, sequential development, combined sentences, and introductory clauses should be examined by the students. Various oral activities should follow which allow practice in these elaborative structures.
3. Even though exposure to elaborative writing is critical, at this point the instructor might find it beneficial to teach a series of sentence-combining lessons in order to further expose the students to connectives such as "and, that, but, while, because," etc. Myers's (1978) and Adegaard's (1972) works provide excellent ideas.
4. Student groups should read at least two of the recommended works either from the primary or intermediate levels. The first reading should be for enjoyment and discussion. These activities should be followed by another reading to locate at least two passages representing each key literary device. The students shall share the devices with their fellow students in a brainstorming activity.
5. The instructor will assist the children in writing a

well-developed story with one major climax including within it each of the literary devices that have been studied.

6. Following an examination of narrative and descriptive literature,students should be introduced to alternate literary forms including fairy tales, tall tales, and fables. Often times students enjoy modeling these story forms. Arnold Lobel's Fables is an excellent example from which to begin.
7. The teacher should now review with the students the elements of expository writing found in informational material. The Weaver's Gift (Lasky, 1980) provides an excellent example of expository writing. Reading this book orally, as well as encouraging silent reading, would be helpful. Once again, examples of the targeted literary devices should be stressed.
8. A variety of publishing techniques can be used to display and share the children's creative endeavors in advancing their literary style.

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